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AUTHOR	Houghton, Owen R.
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ABSTRACT

Discussed is a total systems approach to the problems of personnel policies and practices in higher education administration. It is noted that of the three basic management functions--planning, budget, and personnel--the personnel function has been the slowest to adapt to the process of rapid change. Adoption of a new philosophy is needed that will provide coordination and integration among the many campus forces experiencing similar difficulties. The costliness of compartmental management is described, and it is suggested that in times of accountability, a more efficient use of human resources must assume priority over academic tradition. Recommendations are made for integrating personnel functions, including a consciousness-raising process to develop readiness for change within educational associations. Clarification of institutional objectives and priorities is cited as the starting point for developing a comprehensive system. A method of consultation and communication should be established to encourage all members of the campus community, including students, faculty, and staff, to see how their efforts can apply to the common cause. (LBH)

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By Owen R. Houghton

Those responsible for personnel policies and practices in American institutions of higher education could do well to study Buckminster Fuller's philosophy of comprehensivity. Although best known for having invented the geodesic dome, Fuller likes to think of himself as a "comprehensivist"—a man who views the universe in terms of total systems. He began preaching "comprehensivism" as a scientific discipline in the early 1930's, cementing his philosophical superstructure with the basic concept of synergy. What synergy means, essentially, is that when one talks about energy systems, the sum of the parts does not equal the whole, but exceeds it. In other words, the combined effect exceeds the sum of individual effects. Fuller has indicated that very few people, even on college campuses, appreciate the significance of synergy, perhaps because few of us are trained to think in terms of whole systems.

Fuller feels that the problem with our civilization is that too many of us specialize in one small area. Specialization, he says, ought to be left to computers, since man has the unique capability of coordinating different information input into comprehensive systems. The concept of comprehensivism must be applied to all aspects of human endeavor. In his thinking, specialization becomes highly inefficient and contributes to the myriad of symptoms whose collective origin is man's mismanagement of his environment.

The Need for a Total Systems Approach

The "comprehensivist doctrine" has stimulated this author to a consideration of a total systems approach to the problems of personnel policies and practices. The many changes in higher education in recent years are now most apparent in the area of personnel policies and practices. Of the three basic management functions—planning, budget, and personnel—the personnel function has been the slowest to adapt to the process of rapid change. Many trends now make it imperative that colleges and universities give more attention to a comprehensive personnel management program. Most college and university administrators realize that personnel management has entered a phase which mandates a new approach to the administration of faculty, staff, and student employees.

One factor creating the need for the development of a sophisticated personnel recordkeeping system was the expansion of federal programs in the area of equal employment opportunity. The advent of collective bargaining in higher education also called for a more comprehensive approach to personnel management. Rapid and drastic changes in financial resources necessitate hard decisions relative to personnel, planning, and budget priorities. New pressures are being experienced by campuses across the country for women and minority recruitment, retention, and promotion. State and federal governments are requiring employment data on the race and sex of personnel. Employees are pressing management for wage and salary increases, for fringe benefits of employment, and for the establishment of personnel policies reflective of recent civil liberties or civil rights legislation. The labor market situation in the last two years has highly influenced the personnel picture on campus. Traditional academic personnel practices have been shaken by recent court decisions. The experiencing of a slow-down in enrollment growth has significant implications for personnel management. Uncertainty has been created among personnel managers through a variety of increased restrictions on administrative discretion in personnel matters.

Changes like these indicate the need to adopt a new philosophy which will provide coordination and integration among the many campus forces experiencing similar

Owen R. Houghton *is Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs at the State University of New York College of Arts and Science at Oswego. He has previously served as Dean of Men and Associate Dean of Students on the Oswego campus, and last year worked as Consultant for Special Projects for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities One Dupont Circle, Washington, D. C. A graduate of Boston University, he has extensive academic and applied background in the field of student personnel administration.*

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difficulties. The total systems approach to what is now an institutional problem, rather than a problem specifically for the academic dean or the personnel director, is simply a matter of applying good management principles.

Compartmental Management Is Costly

The 1971 CUPA Personnel Practices Survey, developed primarily for staff personnel, concludes that "the several personnel practices followed in the different areas of personnel operations are developed independently or are developed through either historic tradition or imitation rather than as a part of a general comprehensive personnel program for that particular college."

In these days of accountability a more efficient use of human resources must assume priority over academic tradition. Academic practice has tended to divide college and university personnel management into certain fixed and distinctive parts. Generally, there is one personnel procedure for faculty, a different procedure for administrative officers, a third for the support or classified staff, and possibly a fourth for student employment. Recent trends would suggest that compartmentalized personnel management is creating its own problems, an assumption confirmed by recent interviews which the author conducted on campuses with personnel officers and academic deans.

Integrating Personnel Functions

The dichotomy which has developed over the years in higher education is becoming less tolerable in the face of current conditions. The resource provisions of the personnel director and the decision-making process of the academic dean are being forced toward a more integrated relationship than has traditionally existed. Institutional interests and/or needs dictate that consideration be given to a total systems approach to a comprehensive personnel management program. For example, with a requirement for sophisticated data processing of personnel records of all university employees, more individuals on campus must understand and have input into the personnel data system.

Too often, the personnel office is perceived by the academic dean or department chairman as a threat because its control of data is mistaken for power over academic decision making. Lack of a "service attitude" in some personnel offices, coupled with the "academic power paranoia" of some faculty, likewise tends to perpetuate the compartmentalization of personnel functions. It should be the responsibility of the personnel officer to acquaint all appropriate personnel on campus with the need for a comprehensive system, taking into account recordkeeping at all steps in the process. A dean or a department chairman would soon realize the implications if he had to compile, for example, data to complete EEO-6, the Higher Education Staff Information Report for Public and Private Institutions and Campuses.

Some campuses have begun to experience success with an integrated relationship based on the accountability issue, not the power issue. One college president recently appointed an assistant to the president for personnel services in an attempt to bring all campus personnel functions into a more total system. Administrators on another campus have been operating this way since 1948 and have difficulty in seeing why other colleagues in higher education have been so slow to "see the light."

Support for a More Comprehensive Approach

A brainstorming session held in Washington on personnel policies and practices in the spring of 1973 addressed itself to the trends, problems, and possible responses for colleges and universities in personnel policies and practices. The group, composed of selected presidents, deans, personnel directors, state systems personnel, and staff representatives from several associations, tended to confirm the need for a more comprehensive approach to personnel management. It was pointed out that the new legal requirements indicate the need for consistency in personnel records and seem to be pushing colleges and universities toward a centralized function. Institutions are being asked to respond as a single unit in providing historical data on not only who employees are, but how they got there. Colleges and universities which have been autonomous in their operations are now concerned with organizational and management development.

The above group of administrators agreed that higher education has an opportunity to respond in new ways and to develop a process which recognizes the roles of the various units of the institutional organization. The experiences of two universities were cited; one successfully coordinated personnel functions when required to respond as a single contractor in such areas as employment security, equal employment compliance, social security, fringe benefits, fair labor standards, and occupational safety and health administration requirements; the other coordinated and developed a unified program from recruitment to hiring and data collection through promotion and retraining. Discussing the needs of the small private institution, the group noted that lack of either staff or a knowledge of new government regulations, or both, posed problems. It was indicated that the average small institution does not have a codification of personnel policy, so the question becomes one not of centralization, but of systemization. A comprehensive personnel system for the smaller campus, regardless of the number of personnel involved, would again seem to be a more efficient use of resources.

The government trend toward requiring all institutions, regardless of their status, private or public, large or small, to uniformly respond to requests for data is often considered a threat to the American system of nongovernmental education. The optimist, however, would seize on the

opportunity to use the trend for positive benefit in building a more cooperative and comprehensive approach to the difficulties of managing personnel. Higher education can no longer afford to be sensitive to the relationships between the personnel director and the academic dean on campus. There is now an educational job to be done with governmental agencies reflecting the unique needs of higher education institutions which supersedes departmental, or even individual, institutional boundaries.

Is Your Campus Ready for a Comprehensive System?

While administrators may seem reticent to learn or re-learn within the field generally, educational associations seem to be challenged to consider means for re-education. A "consciousness-raising process" may be needed to develop readiness for change within the field of personnel management. While a manual or textbook is not currently available, many institutional experiences can serve as case studies, dramatically presenting problems which institutional officers would immediately recognize in their own operation. Analysis and evaluation of the personnel approach on each campus should be made a priority item. The questions of "What is it we need?" and "For whom?", and "How do we go about it?" must be answered for all personnel.

The complexity of various problems and the organizational differences of institutions suggest that the only commonality now held is that all of higher education is grappling with essentially the same issue. The new legal and regulatory thrust seems to have provided a leverage for institutions to address problems previously avoided, and there seems to be a whole new profession in college personnel emerging. The lack of guidelines or documentation should not create discouragement for those in personnel management. The problems seem to be universally shared and may be generally viewed as a long-term attitudinal issue that requires some structure and a developmental process.

Making Comprehensivity Work

The starting point for making comprehensivity work is the clarification of institutional objectives and priorities. A method of consultation and communication should be established to encourage all members of the campus community, including students, faculty, and staff, to see how their efforts can apply to the common cause. Enthusiasm of campus members is probably the most effective catalyst for breaking down traditional barriers and compartmentalization. Commitments made to a comprehensive approach must be backed with action, and the college president must assume a role which rewards cooperation and discourages departmental empire building. The ideal of comprehensivity must be held up as a principle in all institutional policies and practices. The words of Ernest L. Boyer, Chancellor of the State University of New York, while spoken on behalf of regionalism and inter-institutional cooperation, apply equally as well to cooperation within the institution: "The need is to cooperate, not because it's the 'gentlemanly' thing to do, but rather because it is the rational and urgent thing to do."

While each institution must develop plans and organize according to its own unique educational mission, one possible approach might be the appointment of a vice president or dean of personnel or human resources at an executive level in the administration. This position should be independent of divisional or departmental lines to insure the most success in implementing a total systems approach to personnel management. Since comprehensivity requires consistency of administration and a coordinated approach to the management of human resources, the person occupying this position should report directly to the president of the institution.

The position of vice president or dean of personnel would be established to consolidate all personnel services on the campus. He or she could be responsible for all or many of the major areas of personnel management, including: institutional organizational charts; job descriptions and job classifications for all college personnel subdivided to include part-time/full-time, tenured/non-tenured, academic/business, clerical/skilled, food service/custodial, security/grounds; administration of equal employment opportunity programs, including recruitment and placement; the contract of employment, fringe benefits, and other terms and conditions; work load analysis; job orientation; training and individual development, including opportunities for promotion and personnel development programs for supervisory and administrative personnel; the handling of all personnel records and problems; work supervision and evaluation; promotion, tenure and separation procedures; initial investigation concerning various personnel grievances; the development of materials to communicate to personnel, including handbooks and in-service training programs; safety and health features; retirement provisions and trends; and other contract management requirements, particularly within the context of collective bargaining.

Comprehensivity in Personnel?

A comprehensive personnel program, while no panacea, is an appropriate step in the direction of "good housekeeping," which is an essential element of good educational management. The comprehensive program should improve employee relations and result in a more efficient use of human resources, thus enhancing the base of authority which the institution must establish for its freedom to teach and to learn. Governmental relations should likewise improve through the quality of personnel management which

a high-level position should provide. The authority and discipline which is the potential of a total systems approach to personnel should reap substantial benefit for the total institution and be a means of overcoming the many pressures which have created a perpetuation of present institutional problems. The holistic approach to higher education has the potential for greater impact on its constituency than is presently the case with the compartmental approach. The whole, Fuller reminds us, has the potential for becoming greater than the sum of its parts.

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